Female Friendships in Plays by Women Writers

by
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Female friendship is a topic explored far more often by women writers than by their male colleagues, most of whom in fact refused to believe in its possibility. With the rise of feminist scholarship in recent decades, a considerable amount of attention has been paid to women's friendships in real life and in novels, but little has been written about such friendships in drama.[1] I propose to examine four aspects of this phenomenon: what types of friendships exist between female characters, in what light those friendships are presented (positive or negative), how central they are to the plot, and to what degree these relationships challenge the existing social order. Admittedly, one must be careful not to over generalize from a very small corpus (roughly a dozen relevant plays from the period of Louis XIV's reign).[2] I have divided the friendships

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[1] Among the studies that I have found especially useful are Janet Todd, *Women's Friendship in Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980), and a special section devoted to friendship, edited by Catherine Montfort, in Volume 7 of *Women in French Studies* (1999). Anne Vincent-Buffault, who in *L'Exercice de l'amitié* (Paris: Seuil, 1995) studies the topic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and who deals exclusively with real life, rather than with literary characters, devotes only a small portion of her book to female friendships. For a general overview of the subject in a neighboring country, see Lisa Vollendorf, "The Value of Female Friendship in Seventeenth-Century Spain," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 47:4 (2005) 425–45.

[2] The texts of the plays referred to in this study can be found in one or both of the following anthologies: *Femmes dramaturges en France (1650-1750), Pièces choisies*, 2 volumes, ed. Perry Gethner (Tübingen: Biblio 17/ Gunter Narr, 1993–2002); *Théâtre de femmes, XVIe-XVIIIe siècles, Anthologie*, 5 volumes, ed. Aurore Evain, Perry Gethner, Henriette Goldwyn (Saint-Etienne: Presses de l'Université, 2006-); 2 volumes have appeared to date.

according to the degree of closeness: extremely affectionate and altruistic (usually reserved for family members), moderately affectionate based on shared views and/or compatible personalities, and short-term alliances that may or may not lead to a closer relationship.[3]

It is probably not a coincidence that the plays that feature the word *amitié* the most often are those where the female friends are close relatives. Although the mother/daughter relationship is rarely treated in drama, and it is even more unlikely to see them feel genuine affection for one another, we find a sincere, even effusive, duo in Louise-Geneviève de Sainctonge's *Griselde*. It is friendship at first sight: the title character and the princess Isabelle form a deep attachment long before they discover their true relationship. Each tries to comfort the other in times of sorrow and is even willing to sacrifice her happiness to benefit the other. This bonding, anticipating the *comédies larmoyantes* of the eighteenth century, relies heavily on weeping, viewed as a sign of moral goodness, and on the vocabulary of pathos (words like *trouble, peine, ennui, tendresse, douleur, tristesse, empressement*). All the mothers in Catherine Durand's *Comédies en proverbes* are tender-hearted, give their daughters a good education and solid moral guidance, and try to protect them. The daughters sometimes rebel, either out of moral perverseness (number 5) or blind love for an unworthy suitor (number 6), but one daughter (Mademoiselle de Létang in number 3) openly expresses her tenderness for her mother, even offering to follow her into a life of seclusion despite her own preference for high society. The gentle and virtuous

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[3] Janet Todd, who limits her corpus to the eighteenth-century novel, in both England and France, has a radically different classification system. Both because of the very different conventions associated with French classical drama and because of how friendship came to be rethought in the era of Rousseau, I have chosen not to adopt her categories. It should also be noted that some of those categories, especially manipulative and sentimental friendships, are not always the most beneficial of relationships.

princess Eudoxe in Antoinette Deshoulières's *Genséric* relies on her mother, the Empress, for moral support and consolation. However, the mother, though concerned about her daughter's welfare, is prepared to sacrifice all other interests to her obsessive thirst for vengeance on the Vandal king. (Curiously, Deshoulières in real life had a very close relationship with her daughter, herself an accomplished poet.)

The typical dramatic treatment of the relationship between sisters focuses more on amorous or political rivalry than on affection: once the women discover that they are rivals for the love of the same man, any tenderness they may have felt for one another vanishes. A refreshing exception to this rule occurs in Catherine Bernard's tragedy, *Laodamie reine d'Epire*, where the two sisters continue to care very deeply about each other, both are willing to sacrifice their own happiness for the other, and it is only a political emergency that forces Laodamie to offer marriage to her sister's fiancé. The friendship reinforces our admiration for their moral integrity, sincerity and gentleness of spirit. As in *Griselde*, frequent weeping and the language of pathos underscore the intensity of their affection, as do their own constant references to their *amitié*.

By companions I mean two women who spend a considerable amount of time together and who share their thoughts freely. One might suppose that the ubiquitous confidantes of classical tragedy display a form of friendship, but that is rarely the case. The typical confidante is of lower rank, is timid in expressing herself, and has difficulty relating to the type of moral and/or emotional predicament that the major character is experiencing. There are some exceptions to this rule, but one would be hard put to find enough reciprocity in these relationships to label them as genuine friendships. Thus, one can establish as a prerequisite for friendship that companions must view one another as equals in both social status and ability. The most developed of these relationships is that of Elvire and Léonor in Marie-Catherine Desjardins's *Le Favori*. It is significant that they call each other by their first names (confidantes generally refer to their mistresses as "Madame"), both call each other "vous" rather than have one address the other as

"tu," and they conduct genuine debates, rather than indulge in one-sided confiding. Although they have radically different temperaments and philosophies and never agree on anything, they genuinely like each other's company and are virtually inseparable. It is significant that Elvire, hypocritical in her dealings with other characters, is brutally frank with Léonor, admitting all her true feelings and expounding her views on various topics. Léonor, a model of honesty and loyalty, remains at Elvire's side at the end of the play, even after her friend has been disgraced by the king.

Catherine Durand provides several cases where rivalry in love does not succeed in destroying a long-established friendship between young women. Elise and Mariane in the ninth playlet are both interested in the sensible and well-off Philinte, though their feelings for him are closer to esteem than to love. Mariane, although she admits publicly that Philinte has chosen Elise over herself solely because her friend has a purer reputation, feels no animosity of any kind. She willingly accompanies Elise to the formal meeting at which Philinte makes his marriage proposal, and she enthusiastically confirms Philinte's high praise of Elise's numerous good qualities. Although Elise never addresses Mariane directly, her final speech indicates that she feels genuine affection for her friend. In the fourth playlet by the same author the two young and beautiful coquettes, Hortance and Angélique, are so fond of each other's company that they quickly unmask the dishonest stratagems of their male admirers, designed to pit them against each other, and dismiss the men. Although neither they nor the men are sincere in protestations of love to the opposite sex, the women take great care to keep their friendship intact.

Allies are the commonest of the three categories. The women join forces in order to pursue a common aim, though they do not feel a close affective bond and spend little time together. In Anne de La Roche-Guilhen's *Rare-en-tout* a young woman who has been jilted by the protagonist informs her rival of his true character, as a result of which the latter rejects Rare-en-tout and returns to her original suitor. The title character, only moderately disappointed, refuses to return to his previous beloved and leaves town in search of further conquests. Owing to the constraints of the

comedy-ballet format (the two rivals are singing roles and are not allowed any spoken lines), their meeting is a pantomime scene, and we are never told whether or not their shared misadventure will lead to a permanent friendship.

Female solidarity can have its limits, however. Alliances between two women to expose silly or hypocritical characters can sometimes be directed at other women. In Françoise Pascal's *L'Amoureuse vaine et ridicule* the delusional Clorinde, who believes herself to be much younger than she really is and who imagines that every man she meets is in love with her, is publicly disgraced through a stratagem plotted by the other two female characters and carried out by their fiancés. In the one brief scene where the friends and cousins, Philis and Isabelle, are alone together, they show their gleeful enjoyment of the scheme they have set in motion. I should note that it is rare in comedies of the period for such elaborate stratagems, involving role playing and disguise, to be organized solely by female characters. Mme de Cassagne, in the third of the *Comédies en proverbes*, stages a similar scheme to expose the hypocrisy of her cousin's older daughter, who claims to be pious and prudish, and to reveal the innate goodness of the younger daughter, who appears on the surface as frivolous and silly. The organizer is motivated both by friendship for her cousin and the younger girl and by animosity toward the older girl, who has designs on Mme de Cassagne's fiancé. However, owing to the brevity of the playlet, the affective links between the characters are not developed.

Alliances can also be formed in order to test and reward the worthiness of virtuous characters. The powerful and beneficent sorceress Ismène in Pascal's *Endymion* works with the goddess Diane to subject the young man to a series of ordeals, both physical and psychological, to determine whether he deserves to be chosen as the goddess's consort. Neither the hero nor the audience discovers until the final moments of the play that Endymion has in fact performed his exploits within a magically-induced dream produced by Ismène in collusion with the goddess. Pascal never shows the two women together, and the presumed friendship between them is only hinted at. Moreover, because of the need for

secrecy in Diane's plan, she is unable to reveal the truth to the nymphs in her service, who thus cannot be considered as her friends.

Alliances in historical drama tend to combine love with politics, but the link to friendship can be very tenuous. In Desjardins's *Manlius* and again in Marie-Anne Barbier's *Arrie et Pétus* two women join forces, despite their extreme political differences, in order to save the younger woman from being forced to wed a ruler whom she does not love and whom the older woman is resolved to marry. In the former play Camille first discovers that Manlius, son of her fiancé Torquatus, has fallen in love with a captive foreign princess, Omphale, whom, according to Roman custom, he is not allowed to marry. However, in her first meeting with Omphale, where she tries to convince the younger woman to renounce her unsuitable passion, she is immediately moved to feel gentleness and compassion, even proposing to play a motherly role: "Princesse, profitez d'un avis si sincère, / Recevez-le de moy, comme de votre mère" (II.6.595–96). When Omphale reveals that Torquatus has also fallen in love with her but insists that she rejects his advances and has no intention to steal Camille's betrothed, the older woman quickly becomes her ally. Since, during the course of their conversation, the two women come to recognize and admire the other's intelligence and heroic virtue, one has the impression that this could develop into a serious friendship, although the play does not show it happen. It should be noted that both women remain calm and level-headed throughout the play, whereas the men tend to act irrationally when swayed by the force of their passion. Camille, in fact, is not in love with her fiancé, whom her dying husband ordered her to marry for reasons of state. If she is determined to carry out his wishes, it is because she genuinely esteems Torquatus, and also because she feels as a fiercely patriotic Roman that the match will promote political stability. In Barbier's play the two women, Arrie and Agrippine, admire the other's intelligence and determination, but no real friendship is possible because of their political and moral incompatibility: Arrie is involved with planning a coup d'état to restore a republican regime to Rome whereas Agrippine wants to preserve the empire, and Arrie is a model of rectitude whereas her

rival is ruthlessly immoral. They join forces only when it becomes necessary to keep Arrie out of the clutches of the emperor Claudius, who wants to jilt his fiancée Agrippine and wed Arrie by force. Agrippine arranges for Arrie to marry the man she really loves, Pétus, and for the newlyweds to flee from Rome. However, once that plan fails, the hostility resumes, and the newlyweds have no option but to commit suicide together.

Turning to the question of how female friendships are presented in women's plays, it is perhaps no surprise to discover that they are almost invariably shown as positive. Taking part in a genuine friendship demonstrates a character's good heart and good judgment. It is unusual for a friendship to lead to immoral consequences, as happens in the fifth playlet of Catherine Durand, where two rebellious young women, eager to experience sexual freedom, sneak out of their homes to attend an all-night party. When discovered, this highly imprudent act leads to severe punishment. False friendships that disguise rivalries in love are likewise unusual. In *Le Favori* the female hypocrite, Elvire, is the first to admit that her friendship to her virtuous rival, Lindamire, is a sham, though she does maintain a true friendship with another woman with whom she is not in amorous competition. Significantly, the male hypocrite in that play, Clotaire, has no sincere friendships at all. I have found only one example in my corpus of friendship that cuts across gender lines. The seventh comedy of Catherine Durand shows a group of five aristocratic young people, three men and two women, who apparently own nearby country houses and who come to spend much of their time together. It seems likely that the friendly relations between them will continue even after the two women are matched up with the two eligible men.

As I have already noted several times, the female friendships in these plays are frequently undeveloped and only a few occupy a considerable space within the text.[4] So it should not come as a

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[4] Curiously, the characters in these plays, while sometimes alluding to their friendships, do not spend time theorizing about the

surprise that virtually none of these friendships is crucial to the plot. After all, the vast majority of literary plots are centered around a heterosexual love interest, making all other types of relationships subsidiary. Even in the play that devotes the most attention to the friendship, *Laodamie,* neither the affection shared by the two sisters nor their rivalry in love is decisive to the outcome. If the queen is initially forced to stifle her love for the handsome young warrior Gélon and later offers him her hand in marriage, it is always because of political considerations. (Interestingly, the impeccably chivalrous Gélon ignores political pressures and remains staunchly loyal to the woman he loves, who is the queen's sister, Nérée.) The rivalry between the two sisters, which causes prolonged anguish for them both, thus adds pathos and extra plot complications, but the tragedy would end much the same way even if Nérée did not exist and Gélon refused the queen's offer merely because he could not return her love.

In virtually every case elimination of the female friendship would not alter the outcome, though it would certainly impact the audience's appreciation of the characters. In *Griselde* the evil prince, totally unimpressed by the virtuous conduct and affectionate relationship of the two women, goes ahead with his nefarious plans and is prevented only by the last-minute revelation that his supposed niece is really his daughter. The attempts of Camille and Agrippine to save their ally and erstwhile rival and her beloved do not go as planned, so that in both plays the virtuous young couple ends up in the clutches of the odious tyrant. In Desjardins's play, labeled a tragicomedy, Torquatus experiences a last-minute change of heart, so that everyone is forgiven and there is a double wedding. Since Barbier's play is a tragedy, the virtuous protagonists must die, though at least they do so heroically. The close bond between Elvire and Léonor has no bearing on the crux of the plot, namely, the king's scheme to reveal to his depressed

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subject. For a discussion of a cultivated woman in real life who gave the matter much thought, see Christine McCall Probes, "Feminine Friendship at the End of the Century: Testimony from the French Correspondence of Madame Palatine," *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 23 (2001) 43–54.

and insecure minister, Moncade, who his real friends are. Even the announcement that Moncade will wed his beloved Lindamire leaves Elvire, who had pretended to be in love with the minister herself, totally indifferent.

It is mostly in the one-act comedies that the schemes set in motion from a female friendship make a significant difference to the outcome. The foolish Clorinde is publicly humiliated, though she remains delusional; Mme de Cassagne's plot succeeds in unmasking the hypocritical conduct of one sister and the moral goodness of the other; and so forth. Even in these short comedies the scheming must share the spotlight with the resolution of the marriage plot, which receives even less substantial treatment. Thus, in the former play the father figure agrees publicly to the marriage of his daughter and niece to the men they love (we are never told whether there has heretofore been any impediment to those matches), while in the latter play the rakish Marquis, whose interest in the seemingly frivolous Mlle de Létang has appeared less than honorable, is motivated by her virtuous rebuff of him and by the tenderness she shows for her mother to mend his ways and offer marriage to the girl. As happens so often in these plays, the man's change of heart comes as a total surprise.

Finally, it could be asked whether the striking emphasis on female friendships signals a feminist perspective, if by that we mean a challenge to the social and political order or a significantly new perspective on women's lives, feelings and needs. In one sense, the answer is negative. I find no examples where friendly relations between two women contribute to their social or political empowerment. Griselde and Isabelle are largely powerless figures who, despite their many virtuous qualities, succeed in little more than trying to comfort one another. Female efforts to reclaim a male tyrant work indirectly at best; in *Griselde* and *Manlius*, for example, the last-act conversion is presented as a divinely-inspired miracle. In *Le Favori* Elvire repudiates the traditional moral standards and gives a spirited defense of coquettish and selfish behavior, though admittedly she never engages in sexual promiscuity and her dabbling in affairs of state is both short-lived and ineffectual. One could argue that the sense of liberation she

feels in her dealings with both men and women at court amounts to nothing more than narcissism, and that even her genuine friendship with Léonor serves primarily to provide her with an excuse to express her views to someone other than herself. The friendship between Laodamie and her sister Nérée, however touching, is largely eclipsed by the fundamental distrust of the Epirot population for female rulers. Laodamie's authority is frequently challenged, despite her apparent competence as a queen, and when Nérée succeeds to the throne at play's end she can be assured of the people's obedience only because she is about to marry the heroic male whom they want as their true ruler. Women who engage directly in political conspiracies are either ruthless and immoral schemers, like Agrippine in *Arrie et Pétus*, or femmes fortes doomed to failure, like Arrie in the same play, or women so driven by passion (for a man) that they either fail to plan properly or else allow the situation to get of hand. It is probably not a coincidence that the women in this last category, like the jealous and insecure Sophronie in *Genséric*, or the timid and manipulated Aquilie in Bernard's *Brutus,* prove incapable of friendship. Indeed, in the latter play, the two female leads, rivals for the same man and tied to opposing political factions, never meet, let alone form a friendship or alliance. Even in Catherine Durand's playlets, where women sometimes succeed in revolts against unreasonable boyfriends or husbands, female friendships tend to reinforce traditional moral and social codes. Women who misbehave, either through hypocritical conduct or rebellion against parental authority, are unmasked and punished. The one clear case of empowerment occurs in *Endymion*, where female friendship allows the heroine to choose a suitable consort after first subjecting him to various trials, but here we are dealing with characters possessing supernatural powers: a goddess and a magician. In fact, Diane is presented as the sole deity worshiped in Greece and Asia Minor, with no challenge to her authority.

On the other hand, one can argue that the valorization of female friendship contributes to a greater sense of personal autonomy and personal worth. While intense friendships do not prevent the women from falling in love with a man and/or agreeing to marriage, they allow for greater personal space in a private

sphere not controlled by men, as well as providing a source of consolation and caring. Significantly, in contrast to what happens in the works of many male authors, no one claims to view such friendships as dangerous and husbands never argue that their wives should be forbidden the company of friends. The genuine female friendships demonstrate that women are capable of displaying such virtues as altruism, loyalty, sincerity and esteem. They also show that satisfying women's affective needs has psychological and moral benefits.[5]

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[5] Carol L. Sherman comes to a similar conclusion in her study of the topic in eighteenth-century novels and memoirs: "'C'est l'insuffisance de notre être qui fait naître l'amitié: Women's Friendships in the Enlightenment,'" *Women in French Studies* 7 (1999) 57–65.